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## ABSTRACT

The metaphor of community has become central to discussions about reading, writing, and teaching. According to this metaphor, an individual learns a discourse through entering into the community that uses it, and by accepting the practices and values of those already in it. Yet an argument can be raised for a definition of discourse that is not tied to this view of community. Discourse can be seen as an inherited set of rules and constraints for using language. Teaching needs to be grounded in this view of discourse that centers on difference and change. The writing classroom is a space in which the differences between the discourse of the teacher, the university, and the students become strikingly clear. By viewing the classroom as a site where different discourses are contested rather than as an entry point into an imagined "community of academic discourse," teachers can center their work on an ongoing criticism of discourses both within and outside of the university. By dramatizing these conflicts, the writing class can create a set of chances for criticism to occur. The challenge lies in finding ways to make students' discourses into something they can question and work on. For example, in a class on writing about film, this means trying to get students not simply to read films more closely but also to question the ways they already have of looking at movies. (A writing assignment and 2 student samples of the assignment are attached.)  
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## DISCOURSE AND COMMUNITY

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Session G8: Teaching Writing as Cultural Criticism  
Conference on College Composition and Communication  
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## Introduction to panel

We intend that the title of this panel be read in two ways. First, we see our subject as being about how to teach our students to write as critics of their culture, to reflect on those discourses—of the home, school, church, media, work, neighborhood and so on—of which they are part. And second, we see it as being about our own teaching as a form of cultural criticism, about setting up our classes in ways that do not simply reproduce the values of our universities and the cultures but that also work to resist and question them.

In talking about teaching writing as cultural criticism, then, we mean to identify not a subject but a stance. We want to contest the notion that our job as teachers can be simply or usefully defined as helping our students write "better"—at least insofar as this simply means better able to meet the demands put on them by one institution or the other, to write better themes, better reports, better memos, better term papers and the like. And we also want to argue against the notion that our task is somehow to "initiate" our students into something called "academic discourse." This is not to say that we believe in some sort of free space that we can lead our students to, where they can write as they really want, unconstrained by the rules and demands of discourses and institutions. Quite the opposite. A writer is always situated, always constrained. But she can also always resist, struggle to transform the constraints of her discourse in order to find a position within it that she can claim as her own. And that is what we want our students to do.

In the talks that follow, Jay Rosen will discuss some ways of getting students to look more critically at the discourses of the mass media, and Robert von der Osten will talk about why and how we might also encourage them to push against the form of the standard academic research paper. I want to begin here by making some distinctions between the concepts of discourse and community that, I think, are useful in imagining a more critical practice as teachers and intellectuals.

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## Discourse and Community

*Communities are distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.*

—Benedict Anderson (Imagined Communities)

The metaphor of community has become central to much of our talk about writing, reading and teaching. According to this metaphor, one learns a discourse through entering into the community that uses it, by accepting the practices and values of those already in it as her own. Indeed, the concepts of discourse and community are now linked together so readily that the two often seem interchangeable (as when "learning academic discourse" gets rephrased as "entering the academic community"). This conjoining blurs useful differences between the two terms. We tend to lose a sense of community as describing a local and specific group, and instead are left with a rather vague and sentimental notion of individuals sharing a "collective project." Similarly, the idea of a "community of discourse" works to hide the fact that many communities include not one but many competing discourses—and that many discourses are more disruptive than they are binding in their effects. Instead discourse gets pictured as something which the members of a community control and, in a sense, own. This leads to a kind of transmission metaphor for learning in which experts initiate novices into the beliefs and practices of the community. The student moves from one sovereign community to another, drops old ways of interpreting in order to take on new forms of organizing experience. Learning gets seen in terms of assimilation, acculturation, conversion. As Pat Bizzell has put it: "Upon entering the academic community, [students are] asked to learn a new dialect and new discourse conventions, but the outcome of such learning is acquisition of a whole new world view" (297).

Such views of community limit our ways of imagining how a writer might form an oppositional or critical stance towards a discourse. Rather, she is seen as either working inside the constraints of a certain community or as remaining outside its projects and concerns—and to be outside is to be nowhere at all, without grounds for a hearing. The metaphor is spatial. It pictures various communities of discourse as having, in effect, different rooms of their own, and represses the idea that a writer can be part of several competing discourses at once. •

I want to argue here for a view of discourse that is not tied to such sovereign and utopian imaginings of community. A discourse, as I am using the term, is something like what Bakhtin called a "speech genre," an inherited set of rules and constraints for using language. The various disciplines and professions have their own discourses, which they attempt to police and refine, but they and the culture at large are also interpellated by broader discourses of gender, class, religion, individualism, ethnicity and so on. David Bartholomae (1985) has argued that we find ourselves always already working within the constraints of such discourses. That is, we do not so much decide to appropriate them as discover that they have appropriated us; their constraints are imposed rather than chosen. This is as true when one writer takes on a certain discourse as her own (the teacher who sits down to write something called "literary criticism" or "composition theory") as it is when another resists its claims (the student who turns in a joycean narrative in the place of a term paper). The writer may accept or flaunt the conventions of her discourse; she may even try to transform them. But she cannot choose what they will be. They are, rather, always already in place, are the very things that make her writing possible.

Crucial to what I want to argue here, though, is the notion that, while groups and individuals alike attempt to use and control discourse for their own ends, neither can do so fully. Communities have borders; discourses do not. Rather, to shift metaphors, they spill over from one community to another—so that a single discourse may prove a shaping force in the thought and writing of several communities, and a single community turn out to be the site of many discourses. Psychoanalysis offers an apt example of how a discourse can elude the attempts of a community to define and control it. Despite the repeated attempts of Freud to define its proper aims and methods, the ways of thinking suggested by analysis soon grew beyond not only his control but beyond that of the psychiatric profession as well, becoming one of the most pervasive influences—though one that in many cases Freud would have reproved—on the culture at large. The peculiar history of rock and roll offers another. Here was a music that began by defining itself against the mainstream culture of its day and then within two decades became the mainstream culture, or at least one of the most salient parts of it—a coopting which has then led to the ironic reappropriating of pop rock by various artists (UB40 sings Sonny and Cher) and audiences (the camp revival of The Monkees).

Certainly there are specialized and technical discourses whose practices are confined to select groups of persons and whose influence does not extend much beyond them. But to take such communities (Masons, particle physicists, lepidopterists) as models of how

discourse works seems misleading. A look at other sorts of groups (English departments, city neighborhoods, labor unions, writing classrooms) often shows the workings not of consensus but difference. Everyday experience suggests that more often than not we find ourselves working, studying or living with people who act and think in ways quite unlike our own. It is curious that, while recent theory posits sets of beliefs and practices shared by entire disciplines and schools of thought, you often find so few signs of this consensus in the talk and work that goes in departments, classrooms, conferences and the like.

If the aims of our teaching were professional in the narrowest sense—if our goals were simply to teach our students how to do a certain well-defined form of literary criticism, or of economics or anthropology or chemistry—then such metaphors of consensus and initiation might hold some limited use for our work. (Though even then to talk of a discourse as if it could somehow be bracketed away from other modes of interpreting, practiced in some sort of pure form, strikes me as suspect. Recall Chomsky's remark that he first went to study with Zelig Harris because he liked his politics.) But since the aims of many of us are not so narrow, it seems to me that we need to ground our teaching in a view of discourse that centers not on consensus but on difference and change. Here we can perhaps build on the work of Mary Louise Pratt, who has argued recently for the study of "the workings of language across rather than within lines of social differentiation, of class, race, gender, age" (61). Pratt suggests that this study might focus on: "Modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities, speakers of different languages . . . on how such speakers constitute each other relationally and in difference, how they enact differences in language" (60).

One such "zone of contact" that comes to mind is, of course, the writing classroom—a space in which the differences between our own discourses, those of the university and those of our students often become strikingly clear. By viewing the classroom as such a zone—as a site where different discourses are contested rather than as some sort of entry point into an imagined "community of academic discourse"—we can then see our work as centering on an ongoing criticism of discourses both within and outside our universities. Min-zhan Lu has argued that what students need to do in learning the languages of the university is not to leave one community in order to enter another but to reposition themselves in relation to several continuous and conflicting discourses. By dramatizing these conflicts the writing class can create a set of chances for such repositioning—or criticism—to occur.

There is an irony here. For it turns out to be through setting up a certain kind of community—a zone of contact—that we can question the power of discourse. Not only are the two concepts no longer linked, they are in some ways opposed. Nowhere is this more strikingly shown than in a class that takes the discourses of the mass media as its focus. For by having students talk together about the sorts of texts they are used only to consuming in private, such a class can reconvene a small section of the scattered audiences of radio, film and tv as a face-to-face group—thus making the discourses of those media available for criticism in ways they usually are not. Jay Rosen will talk more about the issues confronted in such a class. Let me try to show here what I mean by making such discourses available for criticism, and how I have tried to do so in a class I teach on writing on film.

Perhaps I ought first to say, though, that in speaking of teaching that emphasizes conflict I don't want to suggest that the classroom should be made an uncomfortable place for students. Rather, I mean that the work of a writing course should center on finding and making differences in the discourses of the persons in it. If this sometimes means that the talk in such a class will be more tense, charged, than usual, then that is simply part of the work of learning. As teachers, we need to push against allowing the talk in our classrooms to fall into the easy sort of consensus—well, you have your opinion and I have mine—that ends real dialogue before it can begin. And the sorts of assignments we give our students should be designed—as Dave Bartholomae (1983) has suggested—to interfere with their usual ways of thinking and writing, to make their work less spontaneous and more self-conscious.

The challenge of teaching such a class, then, lies in finding ways to make the discourses of your students—both those they produce and those that, in a sense, produce them—into something they can question and work on. You don't want simply to validate whatever your students may happen to have to say—as some expressivist teachers have been accused of doing—but neither do you want simply to have them replace their own discourses with other "academic" ones. Rather, the point is to get them to look critically at their own talk and writing. In a class on writing on film, this means trying to get students not simply to read films more closely but also to question the ways they already have of looking at movies. In practice, this usually involves, at first, questioning the meaning and value of terms like "entertaining" or "boring," and so I often begin such a course by having the class list the terms they use for talking about and rating movies. Having done so, I ask them to speculate on the sorts of movies the list seems to value or exclude. This



conversation leads to the first writing of the course—in which I ask my students to try to place who they are as filmviewers—to write on what movies have been important to them in the past, what sorts of movies they go to see now, what sorts they avoid, and why. We next talk about genre—which usually leads not only to the usual categories of comedy, drama, western, mystery and so on, but also to less stable but in ways more suggestive ones of sequels, take-offs, star movies (Murphy, Midler, Schwarzeneger, Stalone), "serious" movies, slashers, space, martial arts, gross-outs, yuppies with babies, teenagers getting laid and so on. We try to relate these emergent genres to other cultural and political concerns, and I ask them to write a piece in which they name a current tv or movie genre they know well, identify some of its members, define its rules and conventions, and speculate on its appeal.

We also choose a number of current movies to write and talk about—the point of such work being, as it is in other classes, both to have some fun and to dramatize what can be at stake in choosing how to read or approach a certain text. Midway into the term, I assign a series of writings on the "Process of Interpreting a Film." (See Handout A.) I begin by asking my students to write on everything they know about a certain film without actually having seen it—on the way their expectations about the film have been shaped by ads, previews, the remarks of critics and friends, the prior work of the people involved with the film, its genre and so on. I then have them see the film and write not a standard review but an account of the specific ways the movie met or violated their expectations. (Doing so many students realize that they had brought far more to their viewing than they had previously suspected.) In their third writing, I ask them to locate the comments of two critics, to note the points of difference between these readings of the film and their own, and to remark on the ways the critics have changed their view of the film (or on why they have not). Finally, I ask them to review their previous three writings in order to compose an account of how their reading of the film grew and changed.

Throughout all this, the members of the class read and talk about one another's work—as well as discuss the comments of various theorists on both ads (Barthes, Berger, Williamson) and films (Benjamin, Langer, Tyler). In the course of thinking and writing about their responses to a single film, then, students are confronted with an extraordinary range of discourses. But they are not asked—and I think this is important—to write a conventional review of the film or to apply the methods of a certain critic to their readings of it. They are not asked, that is, to take some new language of film analysis, but rather to analyze their own ways of looking at movies.

And so many of the more interesting responses to this assignment tend to be somewhat unwieldy mixes of autobiography, theory and close reading. For instance, one student, Jim, in writing of his first excursion to see an "art" film, A Long Day's Journey into Night, notes that he was first drawn to it by what seemed to him an odd sort of "small ad with only one small picture (of Katherine Hepburn) and a paragraph of type." He then moves on to talk about how the theater and audience also helped shape his responses to the film. (See Handout B.)

The theater was much smaller than other theaters I had been to. It was more like a private screening room. This created a more intimate interaction between myself and the story on the screen. The audience was also different. They appeared very intellectual and reserved. What's more important they seemed to respect the movie. Too often I have gone to movies where the audience talks more often and much more loudly than the actors they are supposedly watching. This audience quickly hushed as the credits began to roll. . . .

After briefly describing how the film begins to unfold, Jim then remarks:

The audience was acting as moved as I was. The film was shown on one projector only, thus there was a break between reels. When a reel was finished you could hear the crowd sigh relief, like the boxer at the end of a round. During the emotional last scene, when the addicted mother comes down the stairs like a ghost trailing her wedding gown behind her, there was a loud gasp throughout the audience. They reacted as if it were their own mother!

Jim sums up this new experience by, in effect, revising his sense of what a film can mean or do:

Through any number of events and circumstances, occasionally a film will transcend being two hours of good entertainment, and become, for you, a special and memorable experience.

Another student, Steven, in summing up how his responses to My Dinner With Andre were formed and changed, comments that:

In reviewing my responses to the previous sections of this assignment, I find it interesting that where I have said the most is where I say the least. Perhaps I should qualify that statement by saying that where I think I say the most about the film is actually where I say more about how I experience film and the power that pre-conceived ideas have over the act of viewing a film. . .

In the first draft of this assignment I wrote of a conversation that I had with a friend of mine. He had seen My Dinner With Andre and he told that the film had a profound affect on his view of life. He then proceeded to tell me what he thought the basic message of the film was. Whether it was a



result of a subconscious respect for the authority of my friend's opinion or from some other cause I am not sure but I proceeded to watch the film with this message firmly in mind. I wrote in the second draft of this assignment that what had affected me most while viewing the film was the relationship between what the film was saying and how it was being said. Actually, however, it was the relationship between what my friend said and how the film was saying my friend's opinion of what its message was that had most affected me. Parker Tyler wrote of the viewer only seeing part of the film while viewing it. In narrowing it down it seems all I was seeing was just the words of Andre Gregory. These words corresponded to my friend's view of the film's message and apparently to mine while I was viewing it.

A question to be asked is—what made me aware of the fact that I was viewing the film so partially? Well, I first became aware of the fact that I had unjustly simplified the content of the film after I read Stanley Kaufman's review of the film in *The New Republic*. . . . Just the mere mention of something like the economic relationship of the characters sparked the idea in my head that there was more on the screen than what I was criticizing. . . .

This experience raises the same question that Parker Tyler raised; namely, how can a film be criticized as a whole when it is not viewed as a whole but rather only as a part or parts of itself? On a different level this raises the question of the theatrical nature of the film experience as a one-time event as opposed to the conception of a film as a work to be studied and viewed again and again. I saw My Dinner With Andre once and I was most affected by its comparison to my own prior conceptions. If I see this film again will I be seeing the same film I saw originally? . . . Thinking about film in this light (and art for that matter), I am beginning to think that any notion in your mind that you can fully comprehend a work of art or that you understand what it is saying and thus can criticize it—any notion of this kind is the direct result of an initial response that should be regarded with a degree of skepticism and should only be a starting point rather than a final judgement.

What I like about these texts are the ways in which we see the writer gaining a critical distance from his responses to film—yet without wholly disowning those responses. Jim holds on to his notion that most movies will only at best be "good entertainment," but he's now willing to see some films in another more "special" light. And the lesson Steven draws from his experience is not so much that his way of looking at Andre was wrong as that all responses to a film are partial and should thus only be seen as "starting points." Both texts are clumsy at times, and I'm not sure that either writer ends up saying what I'd hope he might (Jim strikes me as too reverential, Steven as too relativistic) but I have to praise how each, to return to Min Lu's phrasing, uses his writing to reposition himself in relation to his familiar ways of seeing and talking about movies.

Students spend most of their time in the second half of the course working on a longer project that asks them to place and read one text in relation to another set of texts or discourses—to interpret a movie or tv program, for instance, as it figures in the careers of

those involved with it, as it exemplifies or works against the codes of a certain genre, or as it responds to some of the cultural or political issues of its day. What often needs to be stressed in class and perhaps here as well is that the point of this assignment is not to have students do a "research paper." It is to have them read a text as something situated, positioned, by the discourses of its culture.

Finally, at the end of the course, I ask my students to look at what has been perhaps the most powerful (and thus often most invisible) shaping force on their work in the past few months—to write, that is, on how being part of a class on Writing on Film has affected the ways they view and think about movies. To do so, I ask them to review their writings for the course in order to locate moments of change or difference: between the sorts of things they wrote at the beginning and at the end of term, between what they said in their writings and what they would say now, between the ways they talk about movies outside class and the forms of talk and writing they found themselves taking on within it. The aim here is to have them think about the classroom as a place where certain kinds of talk and writing are privileged over others, to reflect on how being a student at a university acts to shape the sorts of things one thinks and says.

I've argued here that, by setting up our classes as "zones of contact," we can help our students to grow aware of and perhaps even to resist some of the ways in which they are positioned by various discourses. I don't mean to suggest, though, that in doing so we give them a set of critical skills which they can then apply to all situations and discourses. I believe, rather, that the gains of criticism are always local and strategic. They do not coalesce into the workings of some sort of "critical discourse"—some set of fixed moves and practices which give one power over language. It is often noted that the hardest position to criticize is your own. This would not be true if such a set of skills and practices existed to be drawn upon.

Rather criticism rests on serendipity and desire: on the chance meetings of discourses, persons and texts—as well as on a writer's inclination to pursue the differences that such meetings can reveal. We are, at times, placed so that we see certain texts or events in a different or unusual light—and it is at those points that we can begin to resist the power of discourses, to transform their rules, to become critics. As teachers we need to work to arrange such meetings in our classes and to celebrate the acts of criticism and resistance they allow.

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Joseph Harris  
"Discourse and Community"

HANDOUT A

Assignment: The Process of Interpreting a Film

In this assignment, I would like you to reflect on how you go about forming a response to a film. What sorts of expectations do you bring to your viewing of a particular film? What role do advertisements and other kinds of publicity play in forming these expectations? How does all this influence what you notice as significant (or disappointing) when you view the film? How do the remarks of other viewers—both in writing and in conversation—effect your response?

Your subject in this writing, then, should be yourself as you interpret a film. The point of the assignment is not simply to have you detail your responses to a film but to have you try to make your own methods and inclinations as a viewer a little more clear and explicit.

**Draft 1:** Choose a film that you're interested in seeing and try to make the expectations you will bring to your viewing of it as clear as possible.

Begin with a close reading of a print advertisement of the film. (Please include a copy of this ad with your writing.) What sort of information does the ad give you about the film? What does it suggest to be the film's central appeal or allure? What kind of viewer does the ad seem to be trying to attract to the film? How does it attempt to distinguish this film from the others being advertised on the same pages?

If you're familiar with tv or radio ads for the film, or with a preview for it shown in a movie theater, discuss those too. Again, your focus should be on the sorts of things you're being told to look for in the film, the hints or promises you're being given concerning what the film will about or be like.

If you've heard critics or friends discuss the film, note down what they had to say. If you're familiar with the stars or makers of the film, tell how their past work influences what you expect from them

this time. Finally, think about the genre or type of the film: Is it a sequel? a remake? a take-off? Does it bring to mind any other recent movies?

In short, think of your subject as being everything you know about the film—without having seen it.

**Draft 2:** See the film. Take careful note of what surprises you (for good or bad) as well as what meets your expectations (for good or bad). You may at this point discover that you brought certain expectations to your viewing that you were not aware of in writing Draft One. If so, note them down now.

Focus this draft on the specific ways your present reading of the film adds to or differs from those suggested by the ads, previews, critics and so on that you discussed in Draft One. . What aspects of the film did those previous films highlight? Which did they downplay or ignore? For what reasons, do you think?

**Draft Three:** Find and read what two published critics have had to say about the film. How do their readings of it differ from the one you gave in Draft Two? How do you account for those differences? What sorts of insight into the film do they offer you, and what facets of the film do they appear blind to? Try to explain in what ways your views of the film has changed (or why it has not) after your readings of these critics.

**Draft Four:** Read over your previous three drafts. Based on this reading, write an account of how you formed and changed your view of the film. Be sure to support what you say here by referring back to specific instances in your own writings.

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HANDOUT B

Jim

The theater was much smaller than other theaters I had been to. It was more like a private screening room. This created a more intimate interaction between myself and the story on the screen. The audience was also different. They appeared very intellectual and reserved. What's more important they seemed to respect the movie. Too often I have gone to movies where the audience talks more often and much more loudly than the actors they are supposedly watching. This audience quickly hushed as the credits began to roll. . . .

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Steven

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In the first draft of this assignment I wrote of a conversation that I had with a friend of mine. He had seen My Dinner With Andre and he told that the film had a profound affect on his view of life. He then proceeded to tell me what he thought the basic message of the film was. Whether it was a result of a subconscious respect for the authority of my friend's opinion or from some other cause I am not sure but I proceeded to watch the film with this message firmly in mind. I wrote in the second draft of this assignment that what had



affected me most while viewing the film was the relationship between what the film was saying and how it was being said. Actually, however, it was the relationship between what my friend said and how the film was saying my friend's opinion of what its message was that had most affected me. Parker Tyler wrote of the viewer only seeing part of the film while viewing it. In narrowing it down it seems all I was seeing was just the words of Andre Gregory. These words corresponded to my friend's view of the film's message and apparently to mine while I was viewing it.

A question to be asked is--what made me aware of the fact that I was viewing the film so partially? Well, I first became aware of the fact that I had unjustly simplified the content of the film after I read Stanley Kaufman's review of the film in *The New Republic*. . . . Just the mere mention of something like the economic relationship of the characters sparked the idea in my head that there was more on the screen than what I was criticizing. . . .

This experience raises the same question that Parker Tyler raised; namely, how can a film be criticized as a whole when it is not viewed as a whole but rather only as a part or parts of itself? On a different level this raises the question of the theatrical nature of the film experience as a one-time event as opposed to the conception of a film as a work to be studied and viewed again and again. I saw My Dinner With Andre once and I was most affected by its comparison to my own prior conceptions. If I see this film again will I be seeing the same film I saw originally? . . . Thinking about film in this light (and art for that matter), I am beginning to think that any notion in your mind that you can fully comprehend a work of art or that you understand what it is saying and thus can criticize it--any notion of this kind is the direct result of an initial response that should be regarded with a degree of skepticism and should only be a starting point rather than a final judgement.